

Council approves concepts, shares budget concerns

By Ernie Hood

During the spring National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council meeting May 14-15, members were updated on a variety of recent NIEHS activities and achievements, grappled with implications of ongoing budget restrictions, and voted to approve three concepts for new initiatives (see [text box](#)).

NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., and Division of Extramural Research and Training (DERT) Director Gwen Collman, Ph.D., presented the latest Institute developments in their reports. Council also enjoyed two scientific presentations (see [story](#)), and heard talks on NIH initiatives related to the Big Data initiative and proposed new approaches in the NIEHS Environmental Health Sciences (EHS) Core Centers program.

Budget cuts and continued uncertainty

Budget issues are often a high priority at Council, and this meeting was no exception, given the current situation. The federal government is operating under a continuing resolution until the end of the fiscal year Sept. 30, and the across-the-board sequestration cuts went into effect March 1. Birnbaum said that intramural programs have been cut by 4.6-4.7 percent and the grants program has been reduced more than 5.5 percent, with about 20 fewer grants being funded this year than had been anticipated. However, she noted, "Because we have had a soft hiring freeze for the past two years, we have not had to furlough any of our federal staff."

On a brighter note, as part of her overall update to Council on recent NIEHS achievements and activities, Birnbaum reported that implementation of the new NIEHS strategic plan is progressing well. Leadership is currently reviewing reports from the eight teams addressing the cross-divisional, overlapping areas of the plan. "We are currently getting close to finalizing the leadership directions for how these activities will go forward," she said.

Extramural activities

Implementation of the new strategic plan is driving much of the activity in DERT these days, as the division strives to align its programs with the major elements of the plan. Part of that effort is to comprehensively assess baseline investments across the grants portfolio, to provide a benchmark for systematic, ongoing analysis of how the portfolio changes and grows in different ways, along with the strategic plan concepts.

Collman also described a proposed reorganization of the division. While the Worker Education and Training, and Program Analysis branches would remain as they are, the other programmatic areas would be redefined to align with the goals of the strategic plan. The new branches would be the Genes, Environment, and Health Branch; Exposure, Response, and Technology Branch; Population Health Branch; and Hazardous Substances Research Branch.

There will be a public webinar about the reorganizations June 6, from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m. EST, for public input and comment. Collman will discuss the implementation of the NIEHS Strategic Plan in DERT and the Division's investment across the 11 goals. She will present a proposed organizational strategy to fully implement the Strategic Plan within the Division and said she looks forward to feedback about the proposal.

Those interested in participating should RSVP before June 6 by emailing dertpublicmeeting@niehs.nih.gov to receive the link to the webinar. Information on any special accommodations needed should be included in the message.



Birnbaum maintained a sunny disposition, in light of unrelenting budget pressures, enjoying several light-hearted moments with Council. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Council members, from left, Marie-Francoise Chesselet, M.D., Ph.D., of UCLA; Tom Gasiewicz, Ph.D., of the University of Rochester; and Mary Lee, M.D., of the University of Massachusetts, joined in a humorous moment of their own, during Council proceedings. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



"DERT has really embraced the strategic plan with a lot of enthusiasm and new ideas and energy," Collman told Council. "The next step is to rework the configuration of the division, in a way that allows us to do more in-depth, creative work around the strategic plan goals." (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Tackling Big Data

NIEHS Senior Advisor Allen Dearry, Ph.D., described two new NIH initiatives designed to alleviate the biomedical big data bottleneck — Big Data to Knowledge and InfrastructurePlus. Both programs are to be led by trans-NIH advisory data councils, with shared investment, from the NIH Common Fund and individual institutes and centers, totaling approximately \$100 million over 5-7 years.

“In some ways, we’ve been the victim of our own success,” Dearry told Council. “And in many ways, this issue of how to deal with the data, where to store the data, how to handle the data, how to analyze the data, how to produce results from the data, has become the major bottleneck in biomedical research.”

EHS Centers

Health Scientist Administrator Les Reinlib, Ph.D., described proposed new guidelines for the NIEHS Environmental Health Sciences Core Centers program. The major changes would be the institution of a sliding scale for competitive budgets, creation of partner awards to encourage collaborations, and an opportunity fund to encourage resource sharing and cross-training. Reinlib also proposed a term limit for center directors.

The next Council meeting is scheduled for September 10-11.

(Ernie Hood is a contract writer with the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison.)



It was the first Council meeting for new members Norbert Kaminski, Ph.D., of Michigan State University, left, and Linda McCauley, Ph.D., R.N., of Emory University. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Among several refinements to the EHS Core Centers program, Reinlib proposed some award guidelines that stimulated discussion among members. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Shreffler's report on the ONES program was met with extremely positive feedback from Council members. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



David Eaton, Ph.D., of the University of Washington, left, and Tomas Guilarte, Ph.D., of Columbia University, also made their Council debuts at the May meeting. Eaton had many questions and comments during the course of the day. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



NIEHS Scientific Director Darryl Zeldin, M.D., left and NTP Associate Director John Bucher, Ph.D., conferred during the meeting. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Concepts get green light

Council also approved three concepts during its May 14 proceedings.

Program Administrator Carol Shreffler, Ph.D., presented the proposed revival of the Outstanding New Environmental Scientist (ONES) award program, which seeks to identify and support early stage EHS researchers. The original ONES program, which ran from 2005-2010, made 42 awards in a wide variety of program areas and was considered very successful. The intention is to reannounce the program and make new awards in 2015.

Cindy Lawler, Ph.D., who is acting chief of the Cellular, Organs, and Systems Pathobiology Branch, outlined a proposed new program announcement, Environmental Contributors to Autism Spectrum Disorders. NIEHS has long had an extensive autism research portfolio, and the concept would continue and expand that support, seeking to address gaps in research. The target is to release the announcement in January 2014, with funding to start in December 2014.

Health Science Administrator Heather Henry, Ph.D., who oversees Superfund Research Program (SRP) grants, presented a concept to explore the complex biological, geological, and chemical processes that have implications for exposure risk by living systems. It is anticipated that the announcement would be released this fall, with 6-8 awards being made in the summer of 2014.

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